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ESSAY

The language of the crowd: public congregation in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This essay details the fascination, apprehension, and ambivalence associated with mass crowds and public congregation in urban north India. Most studies of the crowd adopt a classed bourgeois or state planner's perspective. As a result, the crowd is conceptually held at arm's length, its complexities flattened as it is viewed from the outside. In studies of India, the popular and subaltern, made interchangeable with the crowd, is often viewed via prevailing concerns. This essay adopts another approach: it considers the internal, organic language used for crowds in urban north India. Drawing on an ethnography of male sociality in Old Delhi, it examines *khalbali*, which may refer both to undesirable crowd panics and excessive collective pleasure; *dhakka mukki*, for being hurtled helter-skelter in the metropolis, pushing and shoving onto the bus or Metro; and *bheed*, for congested crowds that nevertheless retain their allure. These terms inform a gendered and classed vocabulary of public sociality; mainly men partake of crowds that unfold in popular, plebeian areas of the city. This essay considers these grounded terms vis-à-vis the prevailing social science understanding of the crowd.

KEYWORDS

India; Delhi; crowds; public sociality; masculinity; pleasure

I. Introduction: the normative understanding of crowds

Certain kinds of city spaces are predictably crowded; in these areas, what is thought of as a crowd may not be an exception, but the rule. This paper is an exercise in understanding public dynamics in one such crowded place, the old city of Delhi, in India. Old Delhi was built as the walled Mughal capital in the seventeenth century; it was outpaced in certain respects by modernist New Delhi in the twentieth century (and more recently by its suburbs). It nevertheless remains a node of wholesale trade, Muslim life, and civic nostalgia in north India. This commercial traffic of its varied, layered bazaars results in a perpetual urban churn. A certain cloistered feeling is further imparted by Old Delhi's cramped medieval alleyways, the *mohallas*.

In an earlier study of Delhi's old city, done in the 1980s, its 'congestion' – a medical metaphor which naturalizes treatment with the bitter medicine of state enforced 'decongestion' – was of concern (Mehra 1991). Swelling crowds and chaotic traffic were described by residents as follows:

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The population of the city has swelled in such a manner during the last twenty years that if you walk on the road, four to six people will bump into you ... Four *thelas* [handcart], two bicycles, ten *jhalliwallas* [porter] and fifty people will be jammed from both sides in such a manner that getting out will be difficult. (Mehra 1991, 86)

In such a place, diverse codes of comportment enable everyday interaction and movement. This paper is part of a broader interest in understanding the symbolic and sensorial dimensions of urban interaction in India. Previously, I have written of the queue as a modular mode for organizing space, mediating inter-personal entitlements, and imagining the modern self in India (Gandhi 2013). The queue is a type of socialized regimentation that is often read in terms of aptitude. Linear policing and socialized acquiescence mark a queue's realization. Yet alongside this are examples of interactional improvisation, namely line-cutting and queue-jumping. These may be thought of as creative adaptations that are deviations from the norm, but also as practices that constitute norms. The uncertainty and volatility that accompanies such practices certainly fuels some drama in urban life.

In cities, the queue is expressed alongside other, potentially more volatile, categories of comportment. An intriguing, equivocal example of one such mass gathering is the crowd. In this paper, I offer a dissection of the Hindustani terms employed to refer to crowds.¹ I draw on a broader ethnography of the urban condition, conducted in Old Delhi for 19 months between 2007 and 2009. At one level, this is a taxonomic exercise that elicits the grounded vocabulary by which public sociality is comprehended. At another level, this effort complicates alternately alarmist or romantic notions of the crowd, conceptual oscillations often seen in scholarly and public forums. I seek to understand the language tree linking different experiences of, and terms for, the crowd, which would be more widely resonant in north India, and thereby nuance the potentially reductive analyses of such public comportment.

At the outset, it is worth describing normative uses of the term crowd to comprehend collective gatherings. Here I am inspired by previous analyses of the semantics and etymology of crowds (Schnapp and Tiews 2006). This body has underlined that the epistemological evocation of crowds has acquired new gradations as social orders and urban environments have been transformed. Much of this work concentrates on the nineteenth century in Europe, when discourses concerning crowds were tacitly or explicitly absorbed into presuppositions of early sociology and anthropology (Borch 2012). For example, writers like Elias Canetti understood the subject's relationship to the crowd as ambivalent; there was simultaneously revulsion and compulsion towards the unknown, dark and strange. The crowd was democratic and allowed those within to extinguish their agency; it was libidinal and provided an outlet for pent-up feeling; and, just as the crowd was a vehicle for forming identity, it could easily tip into destruction, into the frenzy of annihilation (Canetti 1962). His formulation of the crowd drew on a long history in western social science. For thinkers such as Le Bon, Durkheim, Freud, and Weber, the crowd embodied a primitive *communitas* and a contagious vitality (Mazzarella 2009). The crowd expressed ambivalent potentials: bonding and destruction, solidarity and violence, effervescence and unreason.

In India, the English term crowd is heard among classes that speak it, and also incorporated into Indian-language sentences. I would like to suggest that in both its discursive iteration and material manifestation, the crowd is a product of historical sedimentation.

For example, historians have shown that British colonial authorities saw the native crowd as inherently opaque and dangerous, thereby mandating a state posture of containment (Pandey 1992). Urban crowds, in places such as the bazaar, were in respectable discourse seen as ignorant, superstitious, and subversive (Chakrabarty 2002, 76). Nationalists such as Mohandas Gandhi adopted this antipathy towards the crowd. For him, mass congregations of Indians were mob-like, ill-disciplined, and lacking in reason (Amin 1995, 168; Guha 1997, 136–141). The prevailing post-colonial discourse on sectarian violence tends to underline this notion of the crowd's potential danger (Hansen 2004). In newspaper discourse, in planners' thinking, and in much social analysis, the open-air assembly of adjacent bodies is regarded suspiciously.

Yet if we suspend the normative bias against the crowd – that is, when we move away from the planner or bourgeois' fear of the popular or subaltern – we find that the vocabulary for public gathering, as used by Indian city dwellers themselves, tends to be quite subtle and varied. Mass gatherings, when seen from within, have a nuanced set of associations. In this paper, I engage in a taxonomic analysis designed to elaborate further our understanding of public congregation in urban north India. I suggest that locating analysis on this terrain offers fresher insights than those gained by looking at prevailing biases and familiar fears of the crowd. In other words, this vocabulary, anchored in a classed, gendered set of entitlements and expectations, may help offer a more suggestive understanding of public norms, group comportment, and phenomenological embodiment in the Indian metropolis.

While this paper concerns the male inhabitation of a certain dense, popular urban space, I do not intend it as a functional analysis of how men use crowds. I believe that functional analyses of crowds, however well intended, invariably reduce mobile and volatile elements to monolithic agency (Tambiah 1996). Certainly an element of intentionality is important in such analysis – which is why it is important to distinguish such public congregations with classic social science's spontaneous or irrational crowd. We might think of the crowd, in experiential terms, as ambivalently latent; one never really knows if, and when, one will enjoy being among others, and it may induce both pleasurable frisson and palpable anxiety. The crowd here is a kind of multi-pronged potential that one can shape but which cannot be precisely engineered. With these caveats to the indeterminacy of the crowd, my thesis is that one can analyse its dispositions from within – rather than simply reiterate its opaque character from without – and thereby gain some insight.

II. A grounded grammar of the crowd in north India

Let us turn to Old Delhi and peruse the grammar for forms of public congregation. If the regimented queue embodies self-restraint and civic decorum, it is shadowed by instances of *khalbali*. This Urdu term refers, at a general level, to agitation or turbulence. It often signals emotional excess or turmoil; it does not thereby denote the interior state of a bounded subject. *Khalbali* implies an overflowing of feeling that is catalysed by another – the agitation or commotion sprung from intimacy and attraction, for example. It is not simply located within an interiorized subject but necessarily expressed as an inter-personal dynamic. It is thus as much an expression of ties between people as it is the feeling within one person. *Khalbali* denotes heightened emotional states as well as public interactions with others.

I first heard this term used to describe an event that happened in Old Delhi's Meena Bazaar – an open area full of hawkers, aphrodisiac-sellers, junkies, Sufi shrine devotees, and pigeon-fanciers, among others – in 2008. The municipality periodically conducted raids in this area, because of the persistent illegal hawking in the area. On one weekend morning, while conducting an interview with a trader who sold rugs and towels in the shadow of the Jama Masjid, an indistinct rumble could be heard nearby. Poking my head outside, I saw some hawkers picking up their wares, spread on the pavement, and strolling away. I also saw others moving: families were moving briskly and with some evident haste. At the time, I assumed that they did not understand the targeted nature of the raid, and were unnecessarily alarmed. Things quieted down, the interview continued, and I thought no more of it.

The next day, I returned to the trader and mentioned the commotion encountered on the weekend. The trader, who had consulted others nearby, replied laconically, with amused eyes: 'they heard about a bomb and that is how that crowd panic started' (*bomb sunne ke bat khalbali mach gaye*). Apparently, misinformation moving quickly through Meena Bazaar's congested lanes had led to spontaneous group action. This is an ever-present danger in India; the national news often features reports of stampedes occurring amidst crowd confusion at a public, political, or religious event.

Yet this is not the only register in which *khalbali* is used to describe the crowd. During my fieldwork, I knew some young wrestlers, who practiced in one of Old Delhi's *akharas* or gymnasiums. Sometimes these young men would spend weekend evenings roaming around the old city. They would stop and get tea for a while, go check out girls in the bazaar, make social calls on various friends, and play music loudly on their mobile phones, laugh among themselves and horse around. Often, they would pick a crowded junction, loiter around, and work themselves up by insulting each other or commenting on others. The Meena Bazaar was a favourite spot for such loafing around.

Following them on these peregrinations, I heard them define this activity by the same term, *khalbali*, that on another occasion had been used to describe panicked collective fleeing. Yet this was a micro-crowd suffused by effervescence and conviviality, not the anxiety or fear denoted earlier. For these young men, *khalbali* meant pleasurable excess, restless energy, and erotic tension – seeing women in public sparked hormonal turbulence.

For these local youngsters, terming their public congregation *khalbali* did not denote the passive complicity suggested by analysts of the crowd. This was not involuntary confusion but deliberately engineered fun. An outpouring of emotions, as with the false bomb rumour, was key to such *khalbali*, but now it was absent fear or anxiety. Indeed, the disturbance or turbulence at work here was sought out – for those young men, loafing about the bazaar was an aspired-for rupture from the obligatory and ordinary. This register of the crowd's life-affirming dimension was captured in a popular Bollywood song, whose chorus is *khalbali hai khalbali* ('things are all shook up'). Unlike the term crowd, which can have, as a noun, a neutral, descriptive character, *khalbali*, does not have an objective or natural vantage point; depending on the context, it may denote anxiety or exhilaration, may unintentionally engulf an unsuspecting person, or be purposively sought after in a group.

Another term for mass crowding and public congregation which I came upon in Old Delhi is *dhakka mukki*. *Dhakka* means to push, shove or force, and can refer to a shock or jolt; *mukka*, from which *mukki* is derived, means to be punched or poked. The

conjunction of both terms in the phrase *dhakka mukki* in the urban context of north India may be translated as ‘agitated melee’ or ‘bruising congestion’. It describes the experience of being trampled while getting on or off public transportation, and being tossed to and fro in the city. When I lived in Delhi, I heard these terms in the daily grind of commuting on public transport, and while extricating myself from clotted clumps of shoppers in markets. A persistent elbowing in the queue, before the bus door opened, might elicit a sharp *dhakka mat do!* (‘don’t push me!’). In their defence, that person might respond, *kya karo, peechhe se dhakka are hain* (‘what am I to do, the force is coming from behind’). *Dhakka mukki* was the city’s diffuse, competitive, relentless force acting on one’s body.

Old Delhi, for some city residents, was synonymous with the unruly crowd. At the Meena Bazaar, I could periodically hear, over distorted speakers, a looping police announcement: *dhakka mukki mat ki jiye* (‘please do not push and shove’). This signalled one meaning: an invasion of one’s personal space that might lead to the loss of law and order. Yet *dhakka mukki* had another register, which came across when two young men I knew in Old Delhi – both migrant labourers working in Khari Baoli, a spice market – described their wanderings. Giggling, one man described the uniquely urban pleasure of *dhakka mukki*. As I listened further, I understood that the men’s *masti* or ‘fun’ seemed to involve purposively jostling women so as to touch them. They would melt into crowds during busy shopping periods, for example, and try and feel up a woman’s body on the sly. *Dhakka mukki*, for them, meant using the crowd as camouflage for erotic entertainment.

As with *khalbali*, the classed and gendered dimension of this language is striking. Men, mainly, use these terms to describe libidinal enjoyment in the city. Women, in contrast, are understood to belong in circumscribed spaces such as the home. By entering urban, public space, Indian women are understood to make themselves available for groping, taunting, and staring (Phadke et al. 2011). As it is normalized, male appetites are allowed satisfaction through demeaning affronts to female bodies.

A third term for crowd behaviour in Old Delhi further complicates our analytical vocabulary. *Bheed* refers to crowded, thronged, or cramped public spaces. As with *dhakka mukki*, it is used by authorities to denote uncivil behaviour. In Old Delhi, it is associated with popular areas, such as Muslim *mohallas* or cloistered residential agglomerations. In these older neighbourhoods, *bheed* comes not infrequently to describe something frightening about the Muslim. A police sign at the Meena Bazaar, the large marketplace near the Jama Masjid, notes: ‘Pay special attention to crowded localities’ (*bheed-bhad wale ilakon mein vishish dhyan rakhein*). This use of the term can here be considered a coded warning of certain populations.

Bheed may refer to congestion that is seemingly manifest as a natural force. In a place with *bheed*, one’s individuality can seem to dissolve. A phrase I heard seemed to underline this: *bheed ki koi shakal nahin hoti* (‘there is no face to the crowd’). Yet the crowd was not always so self-evidently faceless or amorphous. For example, I once carried on an interview with an editor of an Urdu newspaper in Old Delhi. He was describing some contentious political debates unfolding in the Meena Bazaar area. There was a redevelopment plan underway there, spurred by the municipality, and local entrepreneurs had competing stakes in its outcome. The editor noted that some protests had been undertaken; a couple of crowd processions had occurred in which slogans were raised against Delhi politicians

and officials. But the editor maintained that these were not comprised by those actually affected by the redevelopment plan. Rather they were, in his words, ‘hired crowds’ (*kiraye ki bheed*). This is not uncommon in India, when political players orchestrate the appearance of bodies as a demonstration of their influence. Beyond mere public posturing, such crowds may be central to the performance of social divisions. Indeed, the organized mobilization of bodies into seemingly spontaneous crowds has been seen as a key technology for perpetrating communal violence (Brass 1997). Here, what is relevant is that crowds are not self-evident social facts – naturally unreasonable or spontaneous – but are constructs of both design and accident that may incorporate disparate intentions and sensibilities (Tambiah 1996).

Despite the antipathy towards both uncontrived and manufactured *bheed*, the allure of congested urban spaces remains. It is no accident that Old Delhi, the antiquated ghetto counterpoised to New Delhi’s modernism, is also the locus of urban authenticity. Once, conducting an interview at the police station close to the Meena Bazaar, I asked the inspector why so many people were drawn to the area. After all, it was associated with – in his view – congestion, poor Muslims, and instances of public violence. He reflected and answered: ‘a man is always alone in a crowd’ (*insaan bheed mein bhi akela hota hai*). The officer seemed to gesture to the possible contentment of one anonymously amidst others. To be alone in a crowd might be for one person terrifying, and for another bliss.

Here, it is worth evoking analogous urban sensibilities, for any study of crowd dynamics benefits from a comparative perspective. In a study of New York, William Whyte discussed the ‘amiable disorder’ (2009, 228) of street crowds to which residents are attracted. Planning officials, seeing the same phenomenon, moralize public congregation. Whyte notes that people enjoy themselves on the street, are often found smiling and laughing there, and find in the crowd a great source of pleasure. Just as Indians complain of *bheed* and yet are attracted to it,

New Yorkers themselves fervently deplore the city, its horrendous traffic jams, the noise and litter, the crowding. It is their favourite form of self-praise. Only the heroic, they imply, could cope. But they are often right in the middle of it all, and by choice, stopping to have a street corner chat, meeting people, arguing, making deals, watching the girls go by, eating, looking at all the oddballs and freaks. (2009, 228)

This suggests that while the vocabulary for mass crowding and public congregation naturally varies across time and space, there are revealing resonances. While I have confined myself to drawing out terms for crowd behaviour resonant in Old Delhi and more widely across north India, Whyte’s analysis suggests that there is an ambivalent potential to crowds that is both desired and depraved. In this sense, in reflecting further on the value of unpacking the etymology of crowd terms, as I have done in this paper, I would suggest that this equivocal quality is also revealed in crowd terms used elsewhere. For example, certain synonyms for crowds – such as ‘mob’ – have denoted a desired movement and motion as well as moral corruption and social destabilization (Schnapp and Tiews 2006, 186). A comparative analytical language of the crowd must then not throw up another static binary by counterpoising Indian to western notions of the crowd, but attempt instead to understand the subtle symbolic and sensorial dimensions of crowds found in, and ramifying across, specific times and places. This paper represents a small step taken towards this more ambitious analytical objective.

III. Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have sought to contrast the conventional social science or governmental understanding of the crowd – which generally examines it from a distance – with the internal, organic grammar for public congregation in urban north India. I have focused on three Hindi and Urdu terms which index crowds and crowdedness (*khalbali*, *dhakka mukki*, *bheed*). My contention is that by departing from the taxonomy that urban dwellers use for public sociality, and by demarcating their nuances, we may arrive at a more subtle understanding of the contemporary urban condition in India. This paper has been a modest exercise at highlighting the varied meanings of crowded comportment, in line with such an objective. In so doing, it has emphasized the classed and gendered dimensions of such a vocabulary, and suggested non-normative registers that inform notions of the urban crowd.

Note

1. In north Indian cities until the mid-twentieth century, Hindustani, a composite Hindu–Urdu language, was widely used. Hindi and Urdu terms for crowds and congregation are important to examine, for they suggest a deeper historical vocabulary for the experience of urbanity. While many studies of urban modernity in India depart from the colonial era, in north Indian cities such as Delhi, the grammar for public sociality precedes the nineteenth century. Therefore, this paper's discussion of the Hindi–Urdu vocabulary for crowds gestures towards a sedimented if uneven language for metropolitan life. Such a vocabulary may remain vital despite, in elite and official circles, their usurpation by the English term crowd.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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